

# Wanted: Heroes less ordinary

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*"As you get older it is harder to have heroes, but it is sort of necessary." — Ernest Hemingway*

It shouldn't take much to be a hero in Pakistan. There are countless women and men amongst us who qualify for this exalted status (used here in gender-neutral tone). These heroes walk amongst us every day doing their tasks selflessly, steadfastly and quietly. In their own ways they make the lives of others special by being special people in their lives. They ignite hope in our society and sustain it by their perseverance and tenacious service to our community.

But only a few are fortunate enough to display their heroics on a canvas stretched beyond their immediate surroundings. It is these men and women who are granted the opportunity to make an impact on society by their performance, values and character.

And herein lies the problem. The moment we dive headlong into specifics, we hit rocks. And rocks wreck ships, careers, dreams. There is something in this air that corrodes the purity of intentions; that erodes the sheen of idealism and sullies the nobility of character — something that brings out the extraordinary ordinariness of those considered giants. The mantle of heroism is indeed a heavy one to bear.

It should not be so.

Literature in every language is full of heroes, flawed and divine. Heroes — both men and women — are mostly shaped by their times and circumstances. Sketched across a landscape of remarkable unremarkableness, these characters shimmer and glimmer and radiate specialness to all four corners of their mural. We gift them with adulation, adoration and even deification as per the intensity of their real or perceived heroism.

It is a life less ordinary. But when ordinary is even more ordinary than it should be, a life less ordinary becomes more ordinary than it should be. Silhouetted against such a gray expanse, the hero finds his road to heroism that much less difficult to traverse. And yet here at home those who attempt to journey across this treacherous tarmac end up stumbling over the edge. And what a heartbreak it is when they do so.

Humanness can be a terrible burden. It pushes the hero into default ordinariness in a blinding flash of mis-judgement. A courageous climb all the way to the summit of achievement and one small step takes him over the edge into the precipice of jaw-dropping averageness. The gravity of mediocrity is stunningly intense down where mere mortals exist.

And mere mortals remind us that even Achilles had that heel of a problem. The hero will fall if the heel is exposed. The arrow will zip in and slice through that one chink in the armour that exposes the soft folds of his flesh. The fall of the flawed hero is clearly not confined to literary tragedies alone.

And so we experience the acute societal hunger for larger-than-life figures who will deliver us from our humdrum lives and propel us into a fairy tale of honour, glory and the magnificent triumph over our enemies. Our aching desire for heroes shines a light on ordinary men and casts a giant of a shadow behind the backs of very small men.

How hard is it to be noble in spirit and character? How difficult is it to differentiate between service and self-aggrandisement? How troublesome is it to draw a line between lofty aspiration and petty ambition? Is it even possible for heroes to have their heads in the clouds while keeping their feet firmly planted on the ground? There may be providence in the fall of a sparrow, as Shakespeare said in Hamlet, but clearly not much so in the fall of a hero.

In this land of ours, heroes best reside inside the rusty pages of history. Perhaps they have to fade away to come into focus. Those living and walking among us are unable to cover their heels — or their tracks — well enough to save their heroic status from being defiled by the whiplash of their own latent ordinariness. Who is to blame? Us for not deserving them? Or them for betraying us by being more like us?

Were we to be ruled by laws — and not by personalities — the search for heroes would have been abandoned with relish. In modern societies heroes are so archaic, so 17<sup>th</sup> century and so very much to be found in museums and murals. The hero as a savior is such a primitive concept. Heroes are now confined to the worlds of entertainment and sports and are not in the business of saving nations. That's the job of men and women imbued with the spirit of national duty working under the solid confines of laws and institutions.

Not here. Ruled by personalities and dependent on their whims and loyalties, we latch on to them for comfort, safety and basic provisions of life. When laws are applied selectively; when justice is meted out unequally; when fundamental rights are respected miserly, then larger-than-life figures become arbiters of our fates. Like medieval serfs we cheer the knight on a horse come to save us from the savages at the gates; we applaud the warrior who wields his sword in our name and we hail the Caesar who promises us the spoils of war. But when the knight falls, when the warrior slumps and the Caesar is knifed we kneel down with horror to touch the limp body of the midget garbed in the robes of our hero.

As I grow older, I do recognise the necessity of heroes but I also know that I want to be ruled by laws not by heroes. And instead of pinning my hopes on self-proclaimed saviours, I would rather revel in the heroism of everyday Pakistanis who go about doing their small little feats of heroism day after day, one feat at a time.

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